DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 576 CS 213 553

AUTHOR Quayhagen, Patricia A.
TITLE Returning the Human to the Humanities at All Levels.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (Pittsburgh, PA, March 27-29, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; Higher Education; High Schools; *Literature Appreciation; *Reading Attitudes; *Remedial Reading; Student Interests; *Student Motivation; Supplementary Reading Materials; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS Louisiana; Trade Books

ABSTRACT

A high school English teacher in rural Louisiana installed a small "library" in her classroom in order to give students a love of literature and of reading. The library included a motley selection of paperbacks, many from local secondhand bookstores, ranging from children's books through the classics. As a spur to students' interest and imagination, the teacher used videos of some of the works. The class read Robert Frost as well as Shakespeare, Yeats, and a heavy helping of William Faulkner. Many of the students, although they were experiencing "literature" for the first time, became eager readers, and enjoyed a new sense of "being educated." Later, as a graduate assistant, this teacher taught university classes in remedial English. To the standard fare of grammar remediation she added Aesop's fables and classic myths, and found that much of the time students were entranced by the stories. Even in the most basic remediation work of learning to recognize parts of speech, sentences reworked from fables and myths kept students' interest. Literary reworkings of short stories of the American South also fired students' interest. Many students were moved by these "little bits" of literature to search out and read the real thing. (SR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED353576

From: Patricia A. Quayhagen

Univ. of Southwestern La.

Presented: CEA Conference

Pittsburg, March 1992

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Patricia A. Quayhagen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Returning the Human to the Humanities At All Levels

I have spent a good part of my life as an educator, not always in a professional capacity but always with the intention of teaching. Because I was and am an omnivorous reader, I have always attempted with a fair degree of success to instill this love of reading and of writing, whether fine or ordinary, into my own children and into any others with whom I come in contact. After I received my initial degree in 1985 and began teaching high school English I was just as determined to give my students that love of literature and of reading--to make them both thinkers and seekers after the truth. I wanted them to be willing to search for the "why" of whatever they came in contact. So I set about this as countless teachers before me have done. I installed a classroom library.

I placed a freshly painted, slightly rickety bookcase in the back of my classroom and filled it with a motley selection of paperbacks. This collection consisted of works which I had loved as a young child and teenager and others which my own children had read and loved as they were growing up. These books ranged from Joanna Spyri's Heidi to S.E. Hinton's The Outsiders. They included The Chronicles of Narnia and The Lord of the Rings as well as The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown's Omnibus. They also included Reggie Jackson's autobiography and The Umpire Strikes Out. A few of the books were my children's or my own; more had come from the classic

CS213553

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

and children's shelves of our area's secondhand bookstores. I made sure that I had read as many of the books as possible, and those that I hadn't read I talked about with my own children, eclectic readers all. Now I was presenting these books to a new crop of readers.

I felt that if I could only pique my students' interest in reading, I could in short order make them all willing readers. (Unrealistic? Probably. Idealistic? Certainly! But aren't all teachers idealists, at least in the beginning?) As a spur to my students' interest and imagination I began to use videos of some of the works on the bookcase shelves. Not too many, but enough to allow the students to experiment with the ideas presented by the shadows on the television screen then balance them with the ideas preserved by the words in the books. Too, I used videos as the icing om our Shakesperean cakes. After spending almost a full six weeks on one of Shakespere's plays, having the students read it aloud in class and then interspersing the reading with two lengthy tests using notes and open books, I presented my now eager students (how many high school students have you ever met that are willing to watch, let alone beg to watch, Shakespeare on film) with the film.

As they watched these films they learned about cutting (they didn't like it--Shakespeare had written those words, nobody had the right to slice them out of the text), and about subtext. They hadn't seen any of that stuff that Olivier's Hamlet is rampant with. "But Mrs. Q, that's incestuous!" They were right of course and they went back to their books to see if it was really there. They learned, and were happy doing so. One of my students, speaking for the majority, told me what Shakespeare meant to her. "I feel really educated for the first time in my life. Now when someone talks about this, on TV

or wherever, I'll know what they mean." Don't ever try to tell me that the humanities and fine literature are not revelant.

Because I taught at a very small rural school, K-12 with fewer than 300 students, in the backwaters of west-central Louisiana, many of my students were experiencing "literature" for the first time. (When in my first year of teaching I took my juniors and seniors to the parish library some twenty-five minutes away, I found that most of them had never been inside it before. But they all eagerly acquired brand new library cards--and some even used them again later.) My students and I read Frost as well as Shakespeare, Yeats and a heavy helping of Faulkner. Together we discovered Frost's poem, "'Out, Out--.'" Some of them recognized the title as an allusion to lines in Macbeth. We loved allusions and studied them well, for the recognition of one enhanced their sense of "being educated."

The poem is about an accident to a young boy who is injured while using a chainsaw to cut the family's wood. When supper is called the saw leaps "out at the boy's hand," cutting it off and causing his death. The young people in my class were sons and daughters of loggers and knew only too well what could happen when a chainsaw was given its own way or less than the full attention it deserved. One of the young men who had labored long for me and for himself over this and other poems, told me at the end of his senior year that he had never thought he'd love poetry.

"I just didn't figure that stuff had anything to do with me--but I found out it does."

Somehow his statement helped ease a little bit the frustration I felt as a teacher on a level and in a system where innovation and creativity were frowned upon. Still, when this young man's class

graduated, I left too. As I left my classroom in the spring of '89 I gave my "kids" a chance to choose any of the books that were still in that rickety little case in the back of the room. Some of them took none, but many others took two or more. My shelves were emptied, but it was a good kind of emptiness.

In the fall of 1989 I returned to a nearby university to begin my graduate work. I received an assistantship in which I was employed to teach classes in remedial English. As I looked over the texts and packets we were given for our students I found little or no emphasis on literature, rarely a mention of it, and certainly no thought that its use just might be the hook by which we could capture our students' interest and imagination. The students were in our classrooms to be remediated, grammar et al, and nothing else. It seemed they were not worthy of being in the same room with the masters of the language, those found in full measure in the literature books and the writing manuals used in teaching those students proficient in taking standardized tests.

However, in my second semester of graduate work, one of the associate professors and I were given a chance to remedy this "lack of literature" as we co-wrote packets for use in the two levels of remedial English taught at our school. In these packets we employed both history and literature as we attempted to give a cohesiveness to the sentence groups used for corrections in grammar and sentence structure. We retold Aesop's fables and classic myths, finding out that much of the time our students were so unfamiliar with the stories that they were entranced by them. (In fact, one of my older students, a surly young man of thirty who was quite certain that he already knew all this "grammar stuff" and consequently deeply resented having to be in the class at all, admitted, "I hate these rewrites but I'd sure

like to be in a class where you're just teaching mythology.")

We used our sentence groups to teach our students paragraph development and transition. We also used them in teaching emphasis and shifts of emphasis in certain parts of a story, the art of manipulation of words, phrases, and clauses, an art that would allow these "academically handicapped" students a chance to become better writers and more adept students.

These groups of sentences and literary re-workings were used in the most basic remediation as our students were taught to recognize nouns and pronouns, subjects and verbs. We found it is much easier to keep a student's interest in the search for parts of speech when that student is interested in what is being said in the sentences used in the search. We also found that most of our students enjoyed the slightly longer and more complex sentences which we used. They were often insulted by the too simple, "baby" sentences they found in the publishers' workbooks, those books which contained all the rules and regulations they had failed to learn earlier, or, in the case of the older, "retread" students, had simply forgotten over the years. We kept their interest--despite the groans and cries of desperation at various grammar sessions--by using the most vivid myths, the bloodier the better. After all, most of these students have been raised on Freddy Kruger and Jason and love violence and bloodshed, and they soon found that the legends of Antigone, Clytemnestra, and Medea were at least as bloody and violent as their favorite gore, while the stories were a hundred times more interesting than these modern-day myths.

The devotees of All My Children and General Hospital found that their favorite soaps were not the only source of warped familial relationships as we led them through the Oedipus trilogy. Even Aesop

kept their attention when the retelling of his fables engendered an "aha" of recognition of some proverb or saying that they had heard all of their lives. They enjoyed discovering the source, experiencing the thrill of feeling educated.

Of course these myths and fables were not our only literary sources. We discussed short stories of the south, primarily those told by Eudora Welty and William Faulkner, knowing that these writers' stories would "speak" to our students, as they related to these modern day fables. Even a brief discussion of Faulkner's "The Bear" was enough to set off a flashfire of recognition and determination to learn more about the story in a classroom composed mostly of young hunters and outdoorsmen. Young southern males of whatever color still come mostly from a rural or smalltown background, and they still have much in common with each other. They understand and long for the outdoors, especially when they are trapped in a classroom on a magnificent autumn day. They want nothing more than to be in the woods where they can experience the deeply felt bonds of male companionship which they find in the woods and at the hunt.

They experienced all of this in "The Bear" as they related to the sentences which we used to briefly retell Faulkner's magnificent story. Often they were encouraged by this "little bit" of Faulkner to search out the real thing and find out the "all" of it. For our black students, especially, discovering the theme of Go Down, Moses (of which "The Bear" is the single longest story) was an encouragement toward reading more of Faulkner. They found a white American author who understood the black mind and black culture yet who treated them not in separation but in whole cloth, the way most of our lives are lived out in the south. They found he was talking not about race or skin color but about people, about humanity--their own.

In the summer of 1991 I worked as an adjunct after earning my MA in May. I watched as our packets in their second semester of use worked their magic. This time, though, it was not on young men, black or white. I had a classroom (five hours a day, five days a week, for three weeks) composed of fourteen students, all women, as disparate in age and color as possible. As we covered in this intensive three week course, all of the grammar and rewriting normally covered in a regular semester, I saw these students catch fire.

They wanted to, even demanded to, read the books which were talked about in the sentences they were working on. One young woman in her late twenties asked where she could find these books. Her local library did not have them. Other students followed her lead. Many of the books were not available even in our university library for they had been checked out and never returned. With less than a week to go before the end of the session I decided there was only one solution. I brought my own paperback copies of these works from home, went to the secondhand bookstore and found other copies, and handed them all over to my students. I had only two injunctions. Read them and share them. Pass them on.

I am now in the process of replenishing my William Faulkner paperbacks at our local secondhand bookstore. I expect that eventually I will have to do so again. At least I hope I will, and I don't mind at all. It's well worth the money and the effort if it allows my students to understand the human and the need for the humanities in their lives.

Bibliography

Frost, Robert. "'Out, Out—'". The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged. Ed. Edward Connery Lathem. New York: Henry Holt and Co., Owl Book Edition, 1979